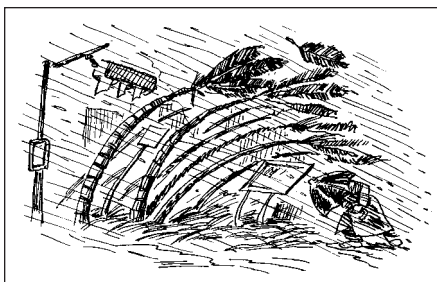


Weird Weather



You may have noticed that the weather seems to be getting stranger. Maybe your area has experienced uncommonly warm winter temperatures or heavy rains. Or maybe you've seen more TV reports of devastation caused by weird weather. Sometimes unexpected weather may be welcome. More often, however, "extreme weather events" (as they are called by meteorologists) such as hurricanes or droughts can be devastating.

These "extreme weather events" include ice storms, hurricanes, droughts, floods, and heat waves. When you look at these weather events together, it may seem like the climate is changing. At this point in time, scientists cannot say that any single drought or hurricane is proof of global warming. They can only say that if global warming happens, we might see more extreme weather events.

Weather is naturally variable, and we can expect unusual conditions to occur from time to time. Short-term climatic changes such as an El Niño event can influence climate around the world, leading to extreme weather events that impact human society. Many of the world's leading climate scientists believe, however, that extreme weather events—like the ones discussed below—may become more frequent in a warmer world.

Texas Heat Wave

It was summertime 1998, and staying cool wasn't easy for Texas residents. A powerful heat wave and accompanying drought swept the region. For 29 days, the Dallas area was hit with temperatures of more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit, which led to more than 120 heat-related deaths. The heat wave and drought also affected Oklahoma, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida.

Florida Fires

Dozens of wildfires spread across Florida in the summer of 1998. For more than one month, firefighters battled an average of 80 new fires every day. Fires burned more than 496,000 acres and caused an estimated \$626 million in damages to Florida's crops, livestock, and forests. Of course, fire itself is not a weather event, but scientists believe that an unusually wet winter promoted abundant growth in the underbrush, and this was followed by an unusually severe drought, which dried the underbrush into a perfect fuel for fire.

New England Ice Storm

During the week of January 5-9, 1998, the eastern United States and eastern Canada were hit by a severe ice storm. Some locations received more than 3 inches of freezing rain when normally they would have had snow. Eighty percent of Maine's population lost electrical service. Overall damages approached \$3 billion in Canada and \$400 million in the United States, including more than \$300 million in Maine alone.

Hurricane Mitch

From October 26 to November 4, 1998, Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras, killing an estimated 6,000 people. More than three million people were either homeless or severely affected. Estimates of the total damage from the storm are at \$5 billion and rising.

